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SUBJECT: NIGERIAN ARMY CHIEF OF STAFF: WE BELIEVE IN DEMOCRACY

REF: ABUJA 131 AND PREVIOUS

CLASSIFIED BY: James P. McAnulty, Political Counselor, STATE, POL;
REASON: 1.4(A), (B), (C), (D)

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) Nigeria's Chief of Army Staff (COAS), LTG Dambazau, told A/S Carson February 8 that the GON military believes there is no alternative to democracy. "We are a young nation and will improve if we give ourselves the opportunity." He termed the violence in the North a "new phenomenon," and said politicians were the cause, not religion. The Army Chief was surprised that the Government of Nigeria (GON) did not react to Al Qaeda's statement of support, cautioning that the GON may need to take the problem more seriously as "no country can run away from" terrorism." General Idris, who accompanied the COAS, called for increased collaboration between U.S. civilian and Nigerian military security agencies. The Army Chief plays a significant role in ensuring the military remains in the barracks during this sensitive time in Nigeria. End Summary.

¶2. (C) On February 8, Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs, Ambassador Johnnie Carson, accompanied by Ambassador and POL Deputy (note taker), met with Nigerian Army Chief of Staff Lieutenant General Abdulrahman Bello Dambazau and Brigadier General Muhammad Inuwa Idris to discuss the current political situation in Nigeria.

¶3. (C) Nigeria's Army Chief, who requested the meeting with A/S Carson, said that he wanted to give the USG insight into the role the Nigerian military was playing in the current political situation. Dambazau said he understood what is in the best interest of Nigeria and the African region, explaining that "from the outside, it appears a clear issue, but within Nigeria, nothing is clear other than the geography." He highlighted, however, "a lot of us do not entertain the fear of breaking up."

¶4. (C) The Army Chief expressed his appreciation for U.S. assistance to strengthen GON peacekeeping training capability and noted the GON wants to maintain its reputation of participating in

peace keeping operations (PKO) outside of Africa. Dambazau explained how he had expanded a small PKO wing into the academy that has already trained two battalions.

15. (C) With regard to the current situation in Nigeria (on February 9, Vice President Jonathan became Acting President), Dambazau declared that "we (the military) believe there is no alternative to democracy." He added that "when focus is diverted, what it takes to be professional is neglected." He commented that "with democracy, the country can focus attention on training and the welfare of military personnel, and we are called to account for our resources which allows us to develop and 'do what's right,' for civil society and fundamental human rights."

16. (C) Dambazau explained that "we have a peculiar way of playing the game, we politicians," noting that the bulk of Nigeria's population is rural with low literacy that politicians "easily manipulate." Dambazau continued, "This is why you find us in a 'religious' crisis." During electoral campaigns, politicians "make promises, including providing roads and water, yet politicians use religious and tribal affiliation that goes all the way down to basic levels such as ethnic, tribes, clans, families, and individuals." He offered that there is a lack of awareness and -- unlike in the U.S. -- voters do not question or understand candidates and believe promises. "That is, in essence, why we experience problems." He continued, "We are a young nation, only 50 years old. I believe we'll improve, only if we give ourselves the opportunity. What is going on should be handled politically."

"RELIGIOUS VIOLENCE" IS POLITICALLY MOTIVATED

17. (C) Dambazau related that he grew up in Kano as one of two Muslim children who attended a Catholic school at the insistence of his father "who believed in education at the same time holding onto his religion." He termed violence connected to religion in the North as a "new phenomenon," noting that, "it is not ingrained into very senior members of that part of the country." There is a problem with unemployment and lack of education. He said that in Jos, which experienced violence in mid January (reftels), one would be surprised that the day after riots, people of different faiths converge in the market as if nothing had happened.

18. (C) Dambazau stated, "The bottom line is that we firmly believe in democracy; that's what will pull us through. We are a rich country with untapped resources, both mineral and human. We need to become more effective and more advanced, but we will be unable to do so without the support of the U.S."

19. (C) The Army Chief replied affirmatively when asked whether this message had been communicated to Vice President Jonathan. Dambazau added, "Understandably, there has been a lot of noise because, in the past, the military was expected to intervene. But we stand firm, the military has a role to play and it is clearly spelled out in the constitution." Dambazau remarked that he had impressed upon subordinate officers the importance of understanding this notion, and that he emphasized it each week. He continued, "We believe in stability and have seen how crises have ravaged people in other countries. We don't envision the UN sending peacekeepers here." He said he assumed that the Vice President receives regular briefings from Nigeria's security agencies, and daily from the National Security Advisor (NSA). Dambazau provides daily input for consideration to be included into the NSA's report.

FIGHTING TERRORISM IN NIGERIA

¶10. (C) Dambazau said he, like us, was surprised the GON did not officially react to the recent statements by Bin Laden and by the statement from Al Qaeda in Maghreb (AQIM) which underscored its support for Nigerian Muslims. The COAS cautioned that some Nigerian leaders may not take the problem seriously enough, and should. He opined that these terrorist organizations were "taking advantage and trying to expand their influence" in Nigeria. Dambazau recounted his presence at a recent meeting where the GON decided to enhance airport security, including training of air marshals, and that no one would be exempt from inspection. The Army Chief also noted he had the intention to convert the 72nd para battalion into a "special forces and counter-terrorism unit," adding that "no country can run away from this problem." Dambazau encouraged us to increase our communication with traditional leaders, particularly throughout the North, "because if someone comes to train their people, they will know."

CALL FOR INCREASED COLLABORATION ACROSS AGENCIES

¶11. (S) Brigadier Idris shared that during the previous Obasanjo administration, there was cooperation between the USG and GON at the military level. However, a decision was made by the GON to have intelligence sharing conducted only through the State Security Service (SSS) civilian agency. He said this has lead to "difficulties," explaining "the military understands, and is better trained to act on, intelligence, but legally the SSS is the GON entity authorized to work with" U.S. security and law enforcement agencies. Idris requested that the law enforcement relationship be extended to military (police, intelligence) officers whom, he claimed, "understand intelligence better than SSS, noting that many SSS officials have political agendas." Idriss stated that internal rivalries keep the GON's SSS and military intelligence services from cooperating effectively and in a timely manner. He cited as an example that in "joint monitoring operations with the SSS, the military cannot come in." He said that under former National Security Advisory General Aliyu, who previously served as chief of military intelligence, the "gap was crossed, but now it has not been maintained."

COMMENT

¶12. (C) Dambazau, a graduate of Kent State University in Ohio (Master of Arts degree, 1980 to 1984), plays a significant role in ensuring that the military remains in the barracks during political turmoil. His support for following a constitutional succession -- a practice he has promoted both publicly and privately -- will be key to maintaining political stability in Nigeria. END COMMENT.

¶13. (U) Assistant Secretary Carson departed Abuja before having the opportunity to clear on this telegram.
SANDERS